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ABSTRACT

This handbook was originally intended for parents whose children attend programs which use "The Creative Curriculum for Early Childhood" (CCEC), but the informaton is also useful to parents whose children attend early childhood programs using other curriculum models based on child development theories. The purpose of the handbook is to explain ways parents and teachers can work together at home and at school to help children acquire the skills, attitudes, and habits to do well in school and throughout life. The guide explains the CCEC program's philosophy and goals. It describes what children are learning while engaged in particular CCEC program activities and what they learn from the environment, the daily schedule, conversations, and at home in the dining room, living room, kitchen, children's bedroom, bathroom, and outside. Concluding remarks stress that the key to providing successful learning experiences for young children is to figure out what interests the child and use those interests to engage him or her in actively exploring and learning about the environment. It is emphasized that every place is a learning environment for a child, regardless of where the family lives or what kind of home the family lives in. (RH)

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A Parent's Guide to Early Childhood Education

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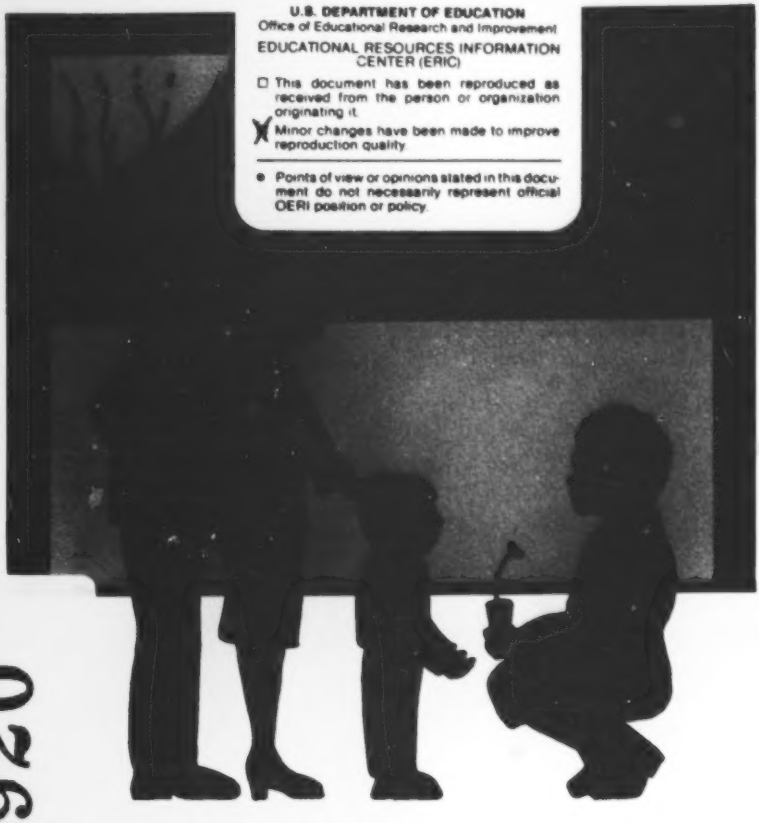

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A Parent's Guide to Early Childhood Education

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Introduction

Do you want your child to...

- become an avid reader?
- enjoy solving math problems?
- speak and write well?
- be creative?
- make decisions independently?
- develop physical coordination?
- have good study skills?
- get along well with others?
- be self-confident?
- enjoy learning?
- love school?

If you do, then our early childhood program is perfect for your child. We share the same goals. The purpose of this handbook is to explain how we can work together at home and at school to help your child acquire the skills, attitudes, and habits to do well in school and throughout life.

For years parents have been asking, "What is my child actually learning in preschool? And what can I do at home to help?" Now we have this handbook. It explains our philosophy and goals. It describes what children are learning from the activities, learning environment, daily schedule, and from our conversations with them at school. Last, it suggests what you can do at home to help your child learn.

Our Philosophy

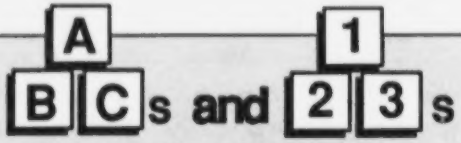
The philosophy behind our curriculum is that young children learn best by doing. Learning isn't just repeating what someone else says; it requires active thinking and experimenting to find out how things work and to learn firsthand about the world we live in.

In their early years, children explore the world around them by using all their senses (touching, tasting, listening, smelling, and looking).

In using real materials such as blocks and trying out their ideas, children learn about sizes, shapes, and colors, and they notice relationships between things.

In time, they learn to use one object to stand for another. This is the beginning of symbolic thinking. For example, they might pretend a stick is an airplane or a block is a hamburger. These early symbols—the stick and the block—are similar in shape to the objects they represent. Gradually children become more and more able to use abstract symbols like words to describe their thoughts and feelings. They learn to "read" pictures which are symbols of real people, places, and things. This exciting development in symbolic thinking takes place during the preschool years as children play.

Play provides the foundation for academic or "school" learning. It is the preparation children need before they learn highly abstract symbols such as letters (which are symbols for sounds) and numbers (which are symbols for number concepts). Play enables us to achieve the key goals of our early childhood curriculum.



Earlier Is Not Better

Many parents are concerned when their children aren't learning letters and numbers. They feel that ditto sheets and homework in preschool programs will prepare their children for elementary school.

We could give your children workbooks. We could make them memorize the alphabet. We could drill them. We could test them. But we know that if we do, your children are going to lose something very important.

Children who are rushed into reading and writing too soon miss important steps in learning and may suffer later on because they lack the foundation they need for using language. Children who are taught to read in preschool may be able to sound out and recognize words, but they may also have little understanding of what they are reading. If they haven't been given time to play, they won't have explored objects enough to know what words (like "hard, harder, hardest") mean. If they aren't allowed to string beads, button, dress up, cut, paste, pour, and draw, they won't develop the small muscle skills they need for writing.

Because math involves more than memorizing facts (like 2+2=4), because it involves logical thinking, children shouldn't be pushed into paper and pencil arithmetic too soon. To acquire the foundation for logical thinking, children need many opportunities to count objects, sort them into piles, and add some to a pile and take some away. It is by playing games like these that they will learn to truly understand addition, subtraction, division, and multiplication. Without these concrete experiences, children may give correct answers but probably won't understand what they are doing and why.

Worst of all, if children are rushed into academic subjects too soon, they may lose their enthusiasm for learning and lose their sense of themselves as learners. If children are told what to learn and memorize by the teacher, they may become more passive and dependent learners, and be less excited about learning something new. Children who are given plenty of time to play, however, learn to ask their own questions and figure out their own answers. They are responsible for their own learning. They see themselves as explorers, discoverers, problem solvers, and inventors.

The Goals of Our Curriculum

The most important goal of our early childhood curriculum is to help children become enthusiastic learners. This means encouraging children to be active and creative explorers who are not afraid to try out their ideas and to think their own thoughts. Our goal is to help children become independent, self-confident, inquisitive learners. We're teaching them **how** to learn, not just in preschool, but all through their lives. We're allowing them to learn at their own pace and in the ways that are best for them. We're giving them good habits and attitudes, particularly a positive sense of themselves, which will make a difference throughout their lives.

Our curriculum identifies goals in all areas of development:

- **Social:** to help children feel comfortable in school, trust their new environment, make friends, and feel they are a part of the group.

- **Emotional:** to help children experience pride and self-confidence, develop independence and self-control, and have a positive attitude toward life.

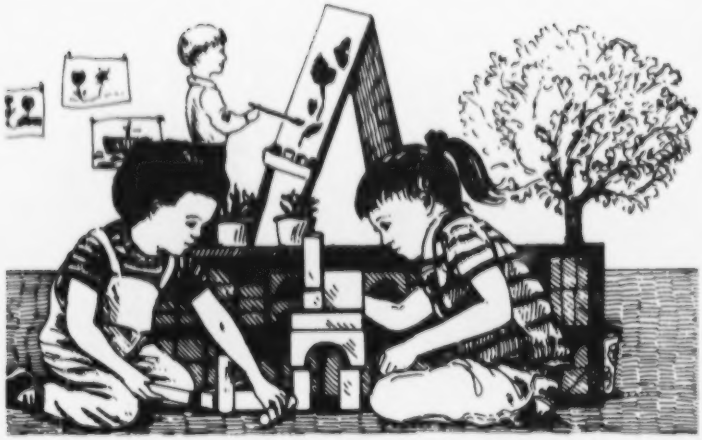
- **Cognitive**: to help children become confident learners by letting them try out their own ideas and experience success, and by helping them acquire learning skills such as the ability to solve problems, ask questions, and use words to describe their ideas, observations, and feelings.

- **Physical**: to help children increase their large and small muscle skills and feel confident about what their bodies can do.

The activities we plan for children, the way we organize the environment, select toys and materials, plan the daily schedule, and talk with children, are all designed to accomplish the goals of our curriculum and give your child a successful start in school.

How Children Learn from the Activities

When you visit your child's classroom, you see a room full of children playing. Like most parents, you probably wonder what your child is learning. To answer your questions, we have made an activities chart. On the left side we've listed typical things children do when they play in each area of the classroom. On the right we've listed the concepts and skills children actually develop from this play.



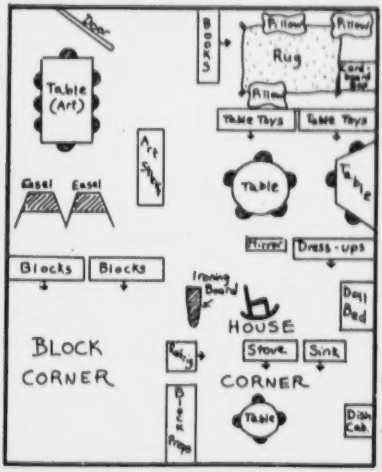
When Children Do This:	They Are Learning to:
Put blocks in trucks and dump them out	Understand size, weight, and number concepts (math) (science)
Argue about where to place the next big block	Express ideas and cooperate with others (language) (social skills)
Balance one large block on top of another	Control and coordinate muscles (physical coordination)
Put on dress-up clothes	Use their small muscle skills (self-help) (writing)
Pretend to be grown-ups	Understand the roles people play in society (life skills)
Separate cups and plates at clean-up time	Group objects in categories (math)
Put pegs in a pegboard	Coordinate the actions of their eyes and hands (reading and writing readiness)
Finish a puzzle	Complete a task (study habits) (self-esteem)
Sort pictures that are the same	Match and classify (math)
Make playdough	Recognize how materials change (science)
Gather paper, scissors, and glue for a project	Plan and carry out a task (study habits) (independence)
Draw a picture of a person	Use symbols (reading and writing readiness)

When Children Do This:	They Are Learning to:
Make boats sink	Recognize cause and effect (science) (logical thinking)
Play beside other children	Get along with others (social skills)
Pour without spilling	Use their small muscle skills (physical coodination)
Turn pages of a book from beginning to end	Read a book from left to right (reading and writing readiness)
Listen to a story	Love books and develop a desire to read (reading readiness)
Talk about what happened in a story	Remember details and express ideas (language development)
Catch and throw balls	Coordinate eye and hand movements (physical development) (reading/writing readiness)
Talk about changes in plants, people, and things outside as seasons change	Sharpen observation skills (science)
Climb on outdoor equipment	Use their bodies in challenging tasks (self-esteem)

What Children Learn from the Environment

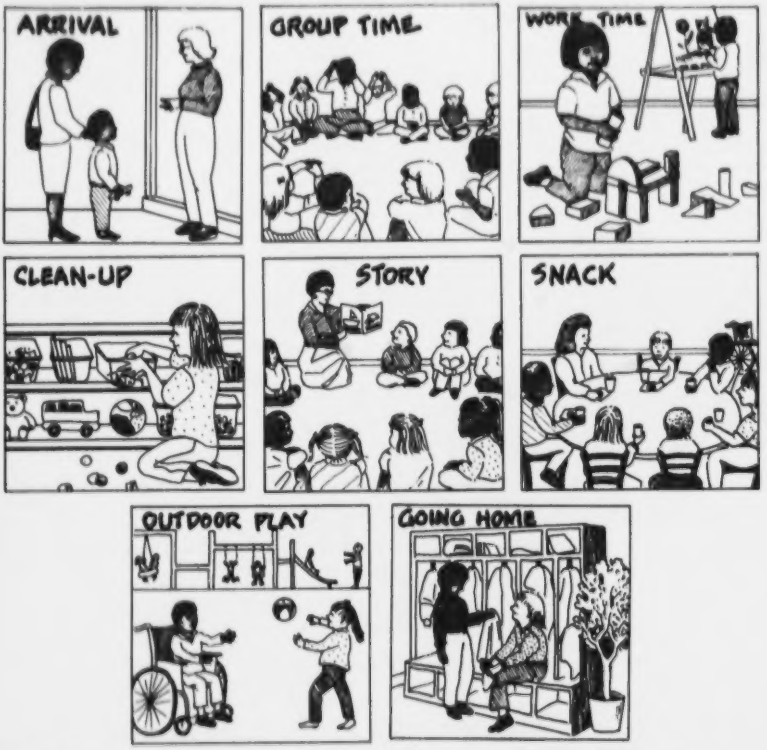
Children learn from whatever environment they are in. Therefore, the classroom and outdoor areas are an important part of our early childhood curriculum. We plan the classroom and outdoor areas very carefully.

- We create seven distinct interest areas—blocks, dramatic play, table toys, art, sand and water play, library, and outdoors—in order to make choices clearer to children.
- We select a wide variety of learning materials for each area with the curriculum goals in mind so that no matter where the children choose to play, they are learning.
- We put materials on low shelves, in containers, and on hooks so children can get them independently.
- We try to keep shelves neat and uncluttered so materials are easier to see and find.
- We group similar materials together to teach children to sort and classify, skills which are important to understanding and solving math problems.
- We put picture labels on containers and shelves so children know where materials belong.



What Children Learn from the Daily Schedule

The daily schedule also supports our goals for children. We want your child to feel secure and independent, to move from one activity to another as easily and confidently as possible. And we want to provide a variety of learning experiences for a well-rounded education. So we plan a daily schedule that takes all these goals into account. We follow this same schedule day after day so children know what will be happening next. A picture schedule like the one below helps children feel secure and encourages independence. (The schedule in our room is drawn on one strip of paper so children can "read" it from left to right.)



This schedule works well for us. After a few months, children are amazingly independent. They can even tell us what they are supposed to do next!

What Children Learn from Our Conversations

Creating a learning environment and planning a good schedule are only a part of the reason our curriculum is so successful. The way we talk with children is tremendously important as well. As children play, we watch how they use materials. We listen. We talk with them to find out what they are thinking and trying to do. Once we feel we understand, we try to help them become aware of their actions and challenge them to think further. Here are some examples of what we might say to extend a child's learning:

When a Child...	We Might Say...	Why We Say This...
Points to his piles of grey and white stones	*"I see you've put white stones in one pile and grey stones in another."*	To describe in words what the child has done and learned
Arranges and glues leaves on paper	*"You really seem to like the leaves we collected on our walk. Tell me all you learned about them."*	To invite the child to use words to describe his observations
Builds a block building and says "Come see my house!"	*"You're a real builder. Your building has walls and lots of room inside. What else might a house need?"*	To help a child examine what she has made and look for new possibilities
Tries on all the shoes, hats, dresses, and jackets in the house corner and is ready to clean up	*"You've tried on all kinds of dress-up clothes today. Which kind are you going to put away first?"*	To encourage a child to put together information, make decisions, and assume responsibility

When a Child...	We Might Say...	Why We Say This...
Spills water as she pours from one bottle to a smaller one	*"I see you're trying to pour the water into that little opening. What different things could you use to get the water into the bottle without spilling it?"*	To help a child look for possible solutions to a problem
Has heard a story about a child waiting for his father to pick him up at the day care center	*"I bet you know just how Jarret felt when he waited so long for his dad. Can you tell me?"*	To encourage a child to explore his own feelings

As you can see, we want children to look at what they've done and think about it. We encourage them to discover and experiment, to find new ways to play with the same material. There's no "right" or "wrong" way to play with a toy. Our goal is to help children to be creative, to solve problems, and to think for themselves.

What Children Learn at Home

Our curriculum works best when teachers and parents work together. Each of us has something valuable to contribute.

We are trained in child development and early childhood education. We see how your child acts with other children and adults. We can assess what your child is learning and how he or she compares to other children.

But only you have in-depth knowledge of your child. You know best your child's interests, fears, joys, patterns, and past. You are most familiar with the world your child is trying to understand. You know about the relationships between the members of your family, and you have shared many of your child's experiences, from family events to trips to the doctor's office or the zoo.

This in-depth knowledge makes you central to your child's learning process and a very valuable resource for us as teachers. If you share with us what is happening to your child at home—the arrival of a new baby, the death of a pet, nightmares, temper tantrums, trips, separation or divorce—we can understand your child better. We can deal with both positive and difficult events through reassuring stories, soothing art activities, imaginative dramatic play, and extra love and attention.

We also see you as your child's first and most important teacher. Your home is your child's first and continual learning environment. You decide your family's daily routines—when you get up, eat, play, do chores, visit friends, and go to bed. The way you talk with your children makes a tremendous difference in how they think, how they feel about themselves, and the kind of people they will become.

If we can work together—we can do some of the same things at school and at home—your child will be much better off. The more consistent we adults are, the more secure your child is likely to feel. And when children feel secure, they are more likely to explore, to experiment, and to learn.

Many parents have asked us what they can do to help their children succeed in school. We usually reply, "Just try to encourage your child to

explore and learn in your home environment the way we help children at school. Help your child become an independent, enthusiastic, curious learner." You don't need to buy a lot of special toys or equipment to turn your child into a creative thinker. The best thing you can do is to be a good listener and to talk with your child as you go about your normal, everyday household chores. Sometimes, after a long day at work, this may seem difficult. But you'll find that this kind of attention has a wonderful effect on children and makes your job as a parent more fun and interesting—and sometimes easier.

The following chart suggests ways that parents and other relations can turn everyday activities into learning experiences for a preschool child.

DINING ROOM

When You and Your Child...	You Might Say...	This Helps Your Child Learn to...
Set the table. Involve your child in figuring out what is needed.	*"How many people are eating dinner tonight? So how many plates do we need? How many forks? Let's count them out. O.K., now let's give one to each person: one fork for Mommy, one fork for Steve..."*	• Count objects correctly • Follow simple directions • Accept responsibility • Match one-to-one when counting
Fold napkins. Encourage your child to think of different ways to fold napkins to make different shapes and sizes.	*"Last night we made triangles. Let's make a different shape tonight. What would happen if you kept folding and folding the corners down?"*	• Increase small muscle coordination • Make and identify shapes • Use language

When You and Your Child...	You Might Say...	This Helps Your Child Learn to...
Read library books together. After you've read a book to your child, discuss it.	*"Who is this story about? What happened to him? What did he learn? How do you think he felt? Now it's your turn to read this book to me. You can read the pictures, O.K.?"*	• Listen to a story and explain what happened • Use language to describe events and express feelings
Look at family photos together. Try looking at an album together with your child as if you were reading a book.	*"Who's that? What's he doing? What do you think she's saying? How do you think he feels? Do you remember what happened that day?"*	• Identify himself as a member of a specific family and cultural group • Use language to describe events • Interpret pictures
Watch a children's television program together. Watch a program like *Sesame Street* and encourage your child to talk about what is happening.	*"Who's that? What does Big Bird look like? How tall do you think he is? How many animals can you count?"*	• Listen to a story and explain what happened • Use language to describe people and events

When You and Your Child...	You Might Say...	This Helps Your Child Learn to...
Put away groceries. Let your child take food out of the grocery bags.	*"What's that? How does it feel? Does it smell? How do you think it tastes? What do you think is in that can? Are there any other cans in the cupboard that look like this one?"*	• Describe objects • Sort objects • Count • Interpret symbols
Prepare and cook simple foods. Teach your child to spread peanut butter on bread, scramble eggs, make pancakes, or pop popcorn.	*"Feel this peanut butter. How does it feel to you? Sure feels gooey to me. Wet too. Look at the popcorn before it popped and look at it after. How is it different? Remember how we scrambled the eggs? What did we do first? Next? Last?"*	• Develop small muscle coordination • Notice cause and effect • Describe how things change • Understand time sequences • Cooperate with others to complete a task
Wash dishes. Let your child wash unbreakable dishes and utensils.	*"What do you want to wash first, pans or plates? Are you going to start with the largest or the smallest pan? There are three steps: (1) we wash it with soap; (2) we rinse it with water; (3) we put it on the rack to dry."*	• Understand time sequences • Develop small motor skills • Understand sizes and shapes

When You and Your Child...	You Might Say...	This Helps Your Child Learn to...
Arrange some toys the way they're arranged in the classroom. Make shelves out of bricks and boards, or use some containers on the floor for your child's toys. Put similar toys together and use pictures on shelves and containers to show where the toys belong. Sing a song as you clean up.	*"Jerry's picking up the cars. Jerry's picking up the cars, Jerry's picking up the cars all by himself."*	• Be independent • Categorize and sort objects • Identify where objects are in space (beside, inside, etc.)
Clean up toys. Encourage your child to put away her own toys when she is done playing. Now and then, make clean-up a game.	*"Let's play a game. Put all the toys on the floor into a bag. Now, close your eyes, reach into the bag and feel one toy. Tell me what it feels like and guess what it is. When you guess, you get to put it away."*	• Identify how things feel • Use language to describe objects • Accept responsibility • Cooperate with others
Make up a story or song. At bedtime, talk with your child about what happened during the day and make up a story or song.	*"Once upon a time there was a boy named Zack. His brother was named Chris, and their mommy was called Sheila. One day they went for a walk on Main Street. And what do you think they saw? They saw a bus, an ambulance...."*	• Develop an understanding of time concepts • Use language to express ideas • Experience a sense of pride

When You and Your Child...	You Might Say...	This Helps Your Child Learn to...
Do water-play activities together. In the bathtub, let your child play with empty plastic containers of different sizes and their tops.	*"How does it sound when you put that empty bottle under water? Look at the bubbles. Where do you suppose they come from? Do all bottles sound the same when you put them under water like that? Which top fits on this tiny bottle? Which fits on the middle-sized bottle?"*	• Understand the concept of volume • Arrange objects in a series from smallest to largest • Use small motor skills
Experiment with objects that sink and float in the tub: corks, bottles, bottle tops, dolls, bottles filled with water, balls, an acorn, plastic cups.	*"What do you think will happen—will this sink or float? What happens if you push it to the bottom of the bathtub and let it go? What happens if you fill it with water?"*	• Explore and identify characteristics of objects • Make discoveries and experiment • Refine small motor skills
Set up a routine or sequence for personal care. Help your child learn self-help skills by reviewing what should be done when.	*"First you brush your teeth, then you wash your face, and last you comb your hair. Let's make a sign with pictures that show each step. In the first box what should we draw? A toothbrush? What goes in the second box? A wash cloth? Then a comb in the last box. Now you can read the sign and do everything by yourself!"*	• Understand time sequences • Make decisions • Use tools with increasing small motor coordination

When You and Your Child...	You Might Say...	This Helps Your Child Learn to...
Discuss everyday experiences in your neighborhood. Whether your child sees people walking to work, fire engines, buses, taxis or tractors, farm animals, or trucks, you can talk about what is happening.	*"I wonder what's making that loud sound. Why do you think the police put on that loud siren and those flashing lights? Where do you think they're going? Let's pretend to be police officers. Let me answer my walky-talky. An accident on 19th Street? Be there right away." (Make a siren sound.)*	• Describe people and objects • Understand time sequences • Understand roles people play in society
Wash the car together. Talk about what you're doing as you soap the car, wash off the suds, and wipe it clean.	*"Want to help me wash the car? Here, rub this soapy sponge on the front fender while I do the hood of the car....You're a hard worker. That fender looks really clean. Next, we rinse off the soap with water."*	• Cooperate with others • Learn spatial concepts • Understand time sequences • Learn new words
Collect objects in a bag. Children love to gather collections of leaves, sticks, stones, seeds, etc. You can take the bag of objects home, describe them, sort them into piles, glue them onto paper, and write word labels for each one.	*"What shall we look for on our walk? O.K., leaves. You found two very different leaves. How are they different? Yes, one has points and the other is kind of round."*	• Sharpen observation skills • Describe objects using spoken and written words • Count • Sort

Conclusion

We hope that this handbook has helped you understand our approach to early childhood education and appreciate the important role that you play in supporting your child's learning. The key to successful learning experiences is to figure out what interests your child and to use those interests to engage your child in actively exploring and learning about the environment. It doesn't matter where you live—city, farm, town, suburb, bayou, mountain, desert, or coast—or what kind of home you have—trailer, apartment, house, or mansion. Every place is a learning environment for a child. Together, at home and at school, we can enable your child to:

- become an avid reader
- enjoy solving math problems
- speak and write well
- be creative
- make decisions independently
- develop physical coordination
- have good study skills
- get along well with others
- be self-confident
- enjoy learning
- love school.

Curriculum Resources

This handbook was originally intended for parents whose children attend programs using *The Creative Curriculum for Early Childhood*, but the information also applies to parents whose children attend early childhood programs using other curriculum models based on child development theories. For more information about our curriculum, *The Creative Curriculum*, obtain the books and audiovisual resources listed below.

Books

- ***The Creative Curriculum for Early Childhood,*** 380 pages ($39.95)
  A comprehensive, environmentally based curriculum consisting of eight modules: Setting the Stage, Blocks, House Corner, Table Toys, Art, Sand and Water, Library, and Outdoors.

- ***A Guide for Supervisors and Trainers on Implementing the Creative Curriculum,*** 200 pages ($29.95)
  Includes supervision strategies, workshop outlines, and handouts for training sessions on each of the modules in the Curriculum.

Audiovisual Materials

- ***The Creative Curriculum*** ($99.50)
  A dynamic, 37-minute videotape that shows how responsive teachers and a carefully organized environment enhance children's growth and learning in all interest areas.

- ***Room Arrangement as a Teaching Strategy*** ($35.00)
  A training package that presents concrete ideas for arranging preschool classrooms to support positive behavior and learning.

For information about these resources and others, write to:

Teaching Strategies, Inc.
P.O. Box 42243
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(202) 362-7543

Teaching Strategies, Inc. seeks to improve the quality of early childhood programs through the design of practical, easy-to-use curriculum and training materials. Resources developed by Teaching Strategies' staff include an early childhood curriculum; a family child care curriculum; self-instructional training programs for staff working with infants, toddlers, and preschool children in center-based programs; videotapes; and guides for supervisors and trainers. Materials and workshops offered by Teaching Strategies are making a difference in school districts, and in Head Start, public, and private child care programs nationwide.

About the Authors

Diane Trister Dodge, founder and President of Teaching Strategies, has 25 years of experience in early childhood education. She has taught in preschool and kindergarten programs; designed educational and training programs for Head Start, day care, and other early childhood programs; and conducted training workshops nationwide and abroad. She co-authored the materials offered by Teaching Strategies with other experienced early childhood professionals.

Joanna Phinney is the mother of a preschool child and has worked in the field of early childhood education as a teacher of three- to seven-year-old children; as a parent educator writing booklets for the FOOTSTEPS parent education television series; as a consultant to preschool classrooms; and as a writer of picture books for children.

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